

The Dilemmas of Documentary Violence in Television

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In an article published in *Dagens Nyheter* in 1993, Slavenka Drakulic discusses a TV news item which included close-ups of a small child, killed by a grenade in Sarajevo:

What can be changed here and now through the deliberate and precise registration of death we see in our living rooms when we watch TV transmissions of the dead and dying in Sarajevo? The little girl's death is only one horror among many, where each preceding horror only prepares us for something even worse to come. The biggest change is the change within ourselves, as audiences, spectators. We have begun to accept this as our role in the drama, that it is possible to play the role of spectator. As though the war were a play. Slowly, imperceptibly, something has taken hold within us. A callousness, an inability to see the truth – the symptom of something dying within us. The close-up of the little girl's face was one scene too much. It serves no rational or defensible purpose. [Translated from the Swedish article.]

Newscasts serve us intrusive pictures of victims of violence, of human suffering and brutal death every day. Do these pictures finally overwhelm us, so that we make ourselves hard and suppress our

feelings of compassion? How much documentary violence can we witness and store away within us? How do we handle the many documentary images – close-ups – of mutilated or dead men, women and children which, via the television screen, invade the peace and quiet of our living rooms?

There are, of course, no simple answers to these questions, but I think these are things we should ask ourselves. The interviews a group at the Department of Journalism, Media and Communication at Stockholm University¹ have conducted with news-viewers indicate that many viewers do indeed develop strategies to ward off all too intrusive or graphic images. I shall return to viewers' reactions, but first I should like to mention some other studies we have done concerning depictions of violence in television newscasts, both studies of content and interviews with news producers (the studies are summarized in Höijer 1994a).

Johan Cronström has compared the depictions of violence in Swedish newscasts from 1979 and 1993. He found several differences, quantitative – the proportion of items with violent content has increased – but also qualitative, in the sense that violence is depicted in greater visual detail than before. The way televi-

sion reports violence has changed (Cronström 1994 and forthcoming).

Our operational definition of a depiction of violence is this:

A news item is considered to contain violence if it depicts a person or persons who consciously commit an act which kills, injures or causes another person suffering, against their will, or which inflicts damage on an inanimate object, or if it depicts the consequences of such an act (cf. Höjjer 1994:17).

In other words, events that may be regarded as accidental, or natural catastrophes, or what is sometimes referred to as "structural violence" (abject poverty, hunger, etc.) fall outside the scope of the definition. Both verbal and visual depictions are included, as are depictions which do not include the actual act of violence. It is enough if the item describes the consequences of the act.

Some feel that we have been all too narrow in our definition when we exclude depictions of structural violence, whereas others feel that we have been too broad, in that we also include the consequences of acts of violence. Whatever the merits of these arguments, I feel we have arrived at a viable and realistic definition. This is not to say that ours is the only such definition. By no means.

Some Findings

Today, roughly one TV news item in four contains violence, as compared to one in six back in 1979. Ah, the difference must be Bosnia, many reasons. But the war coverage from former Yugoslavia is hardly the whole explanation. There were conflicts elsewhere in 1979 – in, for example, Campuchea and Iran – which received

just as much coverage. And there were numerous acts of political violence, terrorist attacks, etc. We find a marked increase in coverage of crime today, compared to 1979. Has the world changed? Or is it simply a change in focus as our world-view has become de-politicized and privatized? Are we not often given the impression that the bloodshed in Bosnia is the work of lawless barbarians running amok, more than we can grasp the underlying pattern of political conflict?

Cronström found a change in the manner in which violence is presented. Visual representations have become more common, and more lurid. There are many more images which show the consequences of violence: pictures of bloodied and mutilated bodies, sometimes only pools of blood, but not the victim. As viewers, we are well aware that violence means suffering, damage and devastation. I suspect we all walk around with some few horrible images which we haven't been able to get out of our minds: the burnt corpses in Stupni Do, swollen bodies floating in the rivers of Rwanda or Burundi.

We are presented with much more graphic images of the consequences of brutality in other respects, as well. The visual presentation of victims has changed, so that we now far more frequently see what we see close up. A close-up shot shows the face or other part of the body, often mutilated parts. These close-ups are also exposed longer periods than they were in 1979 – when close-ups, what is more, were far less common. The camera goes in much closer these days, and violence is depicted with much greater intensity. We have all experienced how the camera explores faces twisted in pain, or lingers on wounds and

Share of all items which contain violence

1979: 16% of the items in *Rapport*

1993: 25% of the items in *Rapport*

28% of the items in *TV4 Nyheterna*

Violence in the picture:

share of items containing violence

1979: 47% of such items in *Rapport*

1993: 62% of such items in *Rapport*

51% of such items in *TV4 Nyheterna*

Pictures of human victims:

share of items containing violence

1979: 13% of such items in *Rapport*

1993: 36% of such items in *Rapport*

25% of such items in *TV4 Nyheterna*

Dramaturgical effects:

share of items containing violence

1979: none

1993: 12% of such items in *Rapport*

13% of such items in *TV4 Nyheterna*

Note: Rapport is the news programme of one of Sweden's two public service channels, SVT2. *TV4 Nyheterna* is the news programme of the commercially financed, privately owned nationwide channel. Both channels operate under the terms of contractual agreements with the state.

bloody bandages, on broken and mutilated limbs, or pools of blood. I think we should ask ourselves whether the news media, when they use pictures like these, have treated the victims with due respect. Have they perhaps actually added to their suffering and humiliation? How would we like it if the victims were our own family? How would we like being displayed to the world if we, ourselves were in such a situation?

Yet another difference in the manner in which violent news events are presented concerns the use of sound and visual effects to enhance the dramaturgics of the story. Fifteen years ago, such effects

were not used at all. Now they are, albeit the practice can hardly be said to predominate. But violence is dramatized in over ten per cent of the violent news items in both SVT2's (public service) and TV4's (commercial) newscasts. The effects may be music or sound effects of various kinds or visual effects like slow-motion sequences or spectacular camera angles. When there is no actual footage of the acts of violence, news producers can heighten the dramatic tension in the story through suggestive reenactments. A story about the murder of a young girl may, for example, be accompanied by the theme from *Twin Peaks*; or, the murder of an elderly man, by letting a hand-held camera follow the route of the man's flight before his assailant finally caught up with him (cf. Frid 1994). Many media scholars have commented on the trend in news reporting toward aping the narrative techniques used in fiction. In the case of news item involving violence, textbook examples abound. The fact is, however, that there is *not one single* example of such dramatization of the news in Cronström's material from 1979.

There are, of course, many reasons why violence receives more attention and is depicted in greater detail and in a more spectacular fashion than it used to be, but I won't go into them here. Instead, I should like to say a few words about the respective perspectives of news producers and viewers and how each group perceives and reacts to realistic depictions of violence.

The Dilemmas of the News Producer

Three undergraduates conducted separate studies in which they interviewed news producers (Berg 1994; Liblik 1994;

Sturegård unp.). They mostly interviewed reporters and editors, but also some video editors and cameramen. Here, I refer to them all as "news producers", i.e. those who produce news. The students found that many of these news professionals defined depictions of violence in the news rather narrowly. In the news producer's view, a depiction of violence is coverage that shows the actual act of violence; it is an eye-witness record. Many of them would not include coverage of the consequences of violence in their definition. One said: "We often show pictures of victims of violence or interview them. But that's hardly a depiction of violence." The term 'depiction of violence' itself is not acceptable to many news producers. It connotes fictional violence (violence-as-entertainment), which news professionals do not want to be associated with in any way. Or, as one respondent put it: "It makes me think of the movies, where they pepper the story with violence to excite the audience. I don't tend to think of the news." The word 'depiction' itself causes trouble: News producers prefer to think of their work as *showing* or *reflecting* reality.

But viewers clearly do include coverage of the consequences of violence in their definition. Viewers often mentioned pictures of victims of violence in the news as examples (Gidgård 1994; Pereira-Norrman 1994). Thus, members of the audience apply a broader definition of violence to television newscasts than news professionals do. The broadest definition was given by the Latin American refugees whom one of the students interviewed. These are people who have left their homelands to avoid widespread violence. For them, violence on television might be coverage of such phenomena as

social injustice, poverty and poor living conditions – what is referred to as structural violence – which we did not include in our study. One of the Latin Americans said: "It hurts all over again when I see these boat-refugees landing on Gotland [a large Swedish island in the Baltic]. They had traveled so far, under such miserable conditions, hungry and cold, with their children. To me, that is an example of violence." None of the native Swedes who were interviewed referred to such news stories.

I think it is important to recognize that our professional and social identities affect our perceptions of violence and depictions of violence. No one perception is more right than any other; we simply have different frames of reference and different perspectives. We should bear this in mind when we discuss these subjects and carry on a dialogue about them. We may use the same words and think we are talking about the same thing, but in fact have entirely different examples in mind.

Developing a personal strategy for confronting and dealing with documentary accounts of violence often gives rise to dilemmas, both for the news producer and for the news viewer.

Part of the news ideology is a strong conviction that news reporting tells the truth and communicates reality. The images that reach television newsdesks are accorded a high level of credibility, even though a growing share of the images provided by news services are not accompanied by any information whatsoever concerning the source, motif and so forth. One news producer said that the texts accompanying the images only "very seldom" mentioned the source of the pictures. "Sometimes the information is given, but just as often it is not. It

looks like many of the really gory pictures come from free lances." Nonetheless, the newsdesk chooses to treat the images as truthful, objective documentations of reality. And, given that premise, the news producer cannot close his/her eyes to the evil and suffering in this world; it becomes more or less imperative to show the pictures that have reached the newsdesk: I quote again: "If we chose not to show these really graphic pictures, we'd be party to creating a kind of rose-tinted 'Idyllia', a world with no violence, or where you only heard or read about it, because the violence is so gross that we can't show it in pictures." Still, news producers take pains not to frighten viewers away by showing all too revolting images. "You have to strike a balance; your viewers should be able to look at the pictures without their stomachs turning." Thus, the dilemma consists of the imperative of showing the grisly truth versus the fear of shocking the viewer too much.

A second dilemma concerns the news producers' conception of their audience. How can they know anything about their viewers' reactions? News professionals often use themselves or their colleagues as measuring sticks: "If I react strongly to a picture, I assume the viewer will, too." At the same time, many news people say they feel they have become inured, blasé after having seen so much documentary violence: "Of course, after a while you develop defences. You make yourself hard, unfeeling. You have to; there's no other way." Or, simply: "You get used to these kinds of pictures. More or less consciously."

A third dilemma has to do with the difference between the individual's professional role and his/her personal values. Some news producers say that they react

differently when they are at home watching television than when they are on the job. In their professional role they sometimes decide to show pictures which they, as private viewers, would not want shown.

Newsdesks have to make decisions about whether to show, or not to show images of brutal violence on a day-to-day basis. It is no easy task. Several news producers report, however, that the bounds as to what can be shown have moved: "Some of the pictures from Latin America showing the aftermath of bombing raids are still out of the question, even if judgements are different today." And: "It's a game of 'follow-the-leader'. It's like somebody has raised the crossbar, but I don't think anyone does it deliberately."

Perhaps we communication researchers can cast some light on the mechanisms at play here, even if we, too, have 'blindness' and contradictions of our own.

The Viewer's Dilemmas

Viewers, too, experience an inner dilemma in their relation to news reports of violence, which they perceive as true accounts of the state of affairs in the world today. The collision between one's private life and the violence being perpetrated elsewhere often arouses ambivalent emotions and thoughts. We feel harried; witnessing violence in the comfort of our living rooms fills us with shame and feelings of impotence. We would prefer not to be troubled by such images, but at the same time we feel obligated to keep abreast of what is happening in the world around us. "You don't want to look, but still, you do. I often say to myself: I won't look, I know it will just be

blood and gore. But, then, you're ambivalent. You look, anyway. It's our duty to know." Hagen (1994) discusses how this ideal of enlightenment, the duty to be informed, is rooted among the general public. Another social dilemma concerns the need to combine our everyday roles and chores with the need to be good citizens, who react to acts of violence and feel compassion. "It makes me sick. Sometimes I cry. But my main responsibility is to take care of my children when I come home from work, because I work quite a lot. I can't spend time sitting there in the sofa feeling sorry for the world. I want to watch the news, and be able to watch them without feeling sick."

Meeting scenes of documentary violence – violence which cannot be dismissed as "only a movie" – gives rise to dilemmas on a deeper plane, as well. It raises questions that are traumatic for us all, questions of suffering and death. It can awaken a deep-seated fears, the fear of death, or painful memories of the death of a loved one. For the Latin American refugees who had first-hand experience of atrocities and rampant violence in their homelands, violence in the news clearly arouses pain: "When I see these graphic scenes, it takes a long time before they fade away. The past comes alive in my memory; the anxiety wells up in me."

We do not know what happens to us in our subconscious, but I feel fairly certain that the images of real death and suffering which assault us in the midst of our everyday lives arouse deep anxiety in most of us. Documentary pictures make us spectators and witnesses in ways that words simply cannot. The images etch themselves into our minds.

As viewers, we develop various strategies for dealing with images and reports

of violence in our surroundings. Individuals differ, of course, but there are also socially determined patterns. Women are more prone to show their feelings in the face of violence than men are, and older individuals are more prone than young people. These patterns were found in the students' interviews, and they are confirmed in a more representative survey we commissioned from MMS² (cf. Höijer 1994). Here I shall mention the somewhat different reactions of men and women, but I should stress that there are *marked individual differences* in the reactions to documentary depictions of violence among viewers of both sexes.

Here are some figures from the statistically representative study: One man in three (32%), and every sixth woman (16%) say they do not react at all to depictions of real violence. Or, conversely: a majority of the women (59%) say they react to the scenes of violence they see in television newscasts "often" or "fairly often". The corresponding figure among men is 41%, less than half.

More women than men report finding it difficult to stand pictures of violence and suffering in the newscasts. They are more prone to be saddened, to cry, to feel sick, to close their eyes or look away when the violence is too much for them. Men are more inclined to 'steel' themselves so that they do not react to what they see. Men more frequently say that they have grown accustomed to seeing acts of cruelty in the world via the news, and that they have become blasé, immune or inured. "Seeing a dead body doesn't affect me particularly. Maybe it should?" Or: "I guess I've become blasé, fed up with it all. I don't react particularly."

Violence and Ideals of Manliness

I would like to bring up another possible explanation to the differences noted between men's and women's reactions which is different from the traditional explanation concerning how our social roles foster men to accept violence, and women to empathize. Naturally, our social roles do exert strong influences; our culture prescribes that women be sensitive, but castigates men if they show too much sensitivity. The man, the male, the hunter has to be strong and not hesitate in the face of violence or the need to use it. Even as young children, boys are encouraged to play more aggressive games than girls. Some of the difference may be biological, as well. But, I think there may be yet another reason why men react less to images of the victims of violence in television news. I believe that men steel themselves to protect themselves against the myth of violence as a specifically male characteristic, i.e., against their fear of becoming a perpetrator of violence, themselves.

In another study I am currently involved in, Peter Dahlgren and I have interviewed people about the things that worry them. One of our respondents said the following. The interview had been under way some time when he suddenly burst out in a sort of confession: "Do you know what really worries me? I worry about myself and all this violence. First, I feel so damned disappointed in people like that, and then I get so goddamned angry thinking about them. So, like, I worry about myself. I wonder, what might I do if I ran into a bastard like that face to face?" "A bastard like that" refers to the person or persons who have committed the acts of violence seen and heard in the media.

Rollo May defines myths as "self-interpretations of our inner selves in relation to the outside world" (May 1991:20). He does not mean 'myths' in the sense of false conceptions, but rather as narratives about the self and society. Television news items about acts of violence tell us that men are aggressive, violent, that men commit most acts of violence in the world around us. They tell us that violent behaviour is part of masculine culture; it is part of the male sphere. When men hear and see documentary depictions of violence in the news, they see a story about themselves through the myth of violence and manliness. It is a painful experience, and the violence-imbedded self-conception is something one tries to keep at an arm's length. This is achieved by not *allowing oneself to react* very strongly to images of violence, death and suffering. Men shield and defend themselves by looking at the pictures without *showing any outer signs of emotion*.

We women are not threatened in our identities at all in the same way when confronted with documentary depictions of violence. On the contrary, we can be confirmed in our more positive self-conception, *assured that* violence is not part of feminine culture. It is something that men do. Since women *do not experience any threat to their self-conception*, they can afford to remain more open to the depictions of violence and have greater leeway for emotional reactions. They do not have the same need as men to dull their sensibilities, but can surrender to feelings of sorrow and pain.

Obviously, many different factors contribute to how we as individuals react to depictions of real violence and, ultimately, to violence itself. They have to do with society, the perpetrators of vio-

lence and victims of violence, and on an inner plane, with myths and conceptions of the self, the actor, the victim and, ultimately, of death. We all have a relation to death. But many of us only come in contact with real death via the television screen, in the form of brutal ends to human life, as something considered suitable for public display.

News producers justify the increasingly graphic images of victims of violence they show in terms of their duty to inform; they say they want to awaken their audiences. Certainly, some viewers are moved and aroused. The images etch themselves into their memories and linger on. But many – men, but women, too – have put up a shield and ward off the pictures. "It's not like I go around thinking about it afterwards. Those really revolting scenes, you just filter them out." Or: "It would be awful to have to cry yourself to sleep every night over what is happening in Rwanda. It doesn't do any good." And viewers talk of being sated with scenes of violence, such as those from the conflict in Bosnia. "Personally, I usually switch channels whenever Bosnia comes up. It's been done to death." Or: "It's on everywhere, all the time. After a while, you just don't care any more."

Slavenka Drakulic is critical of the deliberate and precise registrations of death that invade our living rooms; she warns

that their only purpose is to prepare us for new, worse atrocities. As one of our interviewees put it: "You are fed the same kind of pictures day after day. Finally, you tell yourself, 'Okay. Worse things happen!' – just to be able to stand it." That seems a fairly reasonable strategy to protect oneself from a steady inflation in grisly images of violence. How can we store away all of this misery? We cannot – as one of our respondents cited above, said – cry ourselves to sleep every night. We have to go on living our lives, while *at the same time all those we have seen on our TV screens* are left to suffer their terrible fates. Rolf Künstlicher (forthcoming), a psychoanalyst, speaks of how a spiritual gulf or cleft opens within us as a result of our more or less daily exposure to violence and suffering in the media. We watch, and then we drink a cup of coffee and do something else.

I see a risk that documentary depictions of violence in television may no longer be the alarm-clock we hope they might be, if they continue like this, day after day. Perhaps they already have been reduced to documents, the main purpose of which is to prepare us for worse to come?

Pictures can arouse and awaken and get people to commit themselves, but if we feel invaded by images of horror, are we not likely to turn our backs and seek comfort in coziness of our private lives?

Notes

1. In addition to myself, doctoral candidate Johan Cronström and undergraduates H Berg, E L Frid, A Gidgård, M Libnik, L Pereira-Norrman and L Sturegård.
2. MMS: Mediamätningar i Skandinavien (Stockholm), an audience research institute with field research capability.

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